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A cowboy culture arrives in Sweden

So even Sweden, the conscience of the world, has a seamy underside.

How else can we make sense of the assassination of Olof Palme, who never tired of reminding the rest of the world that he was the most peaceful and compassionate leader of the most peaceful and compassionate nation in the world?

The Americans, who have seen abuse and calumny heaped on their own country (much of it from Sweden) for the assassinations and attempted assassinations that have become part of the American way of life, can certainly sympathize with the stunned incredulity Swedes feel this morning.

Some of the grief, however, seems to be grief more for the reputation of the Swedish conscience — big enough for the entire world and several of the closer planets — than for Mr. Palme himself.

"There are no words to describe the detest and dismay we feel, confronted with the murder of our prime minister," a Swedish divine told weeping parishoners at Stockholm's ancient Great Church cathedral, the burial place of Swedish kings.

"Such things must not happen in Sweden. Many think it happens in the U.S.A., in Beirut, but not here in our country."

Bjorn Rosengren, a unionist with whom the Palmes had exchanged greetings at the theater just before the shooting, couldn't believe that evil was possible on a Swedish street, either.

"In my car [on the way home] I turned to my wife and said, 'Isn't this a fantastic country where the prime minister can go to the movies and he and his wife walk home arm-in-arm through the city?'"

Not so long ago this was possible right here in Washington. Any reporter willing to get up at 6 a.m. could take an early-morning stroll with Harry Truman, and be rewarded with some of Mr. Truman's most printable quips and retorts. Jack Kennedy was fond of sneaking out of the White House after

supper, eluding his Secret Service guards, and slipping into a seat on the back row at one of the movie theaters on 15th Street just off Pennsylvania Ave.

But terror and then madness intruded, as first civility and then sanity were squeezed from the lives of national leaders. The toy countries, like Sweden, thought they would be immune from state terror and violence.

Mr. Palme, for example, loved to hector and lecture the superpower — that's superpower, singular. When the other superpower was bad, it was only because the devil made Moscow do it. The devil, naturally, was the United States.

The man of peace marched against the United States during the Vietnam War, arm-in-arm with the North Vietnamese ambassador to Stockholm, at a time when American fliers were hanging in torture harness from the walls of North Vietnamese prisons.

The compassionate leader was so enraged by Richard Nixon's 1972 bombing of Hanoi — the one act that compelled the North Vietnamese to begin fattening their brutalized and emaciated American prisoners for release — that he likened it to the atrocities of Adolf Hitler (whose agents, spies and provocateurs occupied most of the good hotel rooms in neutral Stockholm during World War II).

But cold reality had begun to intrude even on Mr. Palme's balmy vision of the world in recent years. When the Soviets sent their subs into Swedish harbors, beginning in 1981, he growled threats like a blue-eyed, blond-haired Rambo.

Nevertheless, when he set up a commission to study ways to make battlefields safe, he "persuaded" Georgi Arbatov, the Soviet propagandist, KGB officer and another of ABC-TV's free-lance Moscow commentators, to join him.

Predictably, Mr. Arbatov cried great buckets of KGB-issue tears yesterday, as the Soviet government announced that it had "solved" the slaying as the work of the CIA. The slaying must not damage Swedish-Soviet relations, he said.

Why should a .357-caliber Magnum be allowed to do what Soviet subs could not?